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AUTHOR Reinertson, Jacquelyn M.
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ABSTRACT

In winter 1979, a study was conducted at C. S. Mott Community College (MCC) to determine the salient characteristics of successful students. Students in 63 upper-level courses took the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form A, and also completed a demographic questionnaire. The mean total reading score for all students had a grade equivalent of 13.1, with raw scores ranging from 6 through 162. The age range of the students was 17 to 67 years, with a mean of 26.45 years, a mode of 20 years, and a standard deviation of 8.2. As age and total reading score were positively correlated, the age category was further investigated, revealing: (1) students over 22 years of age had higher reading scores than those between 17 and 22 years of age; (2) students over 30 had a higher mean reading score than both other categories and also tended to have more varied scores; and (3) nearly 28% of the "successful" students at MCC were over 30 years old, 71.56% were female, and only 40.54% considered it likely that they would pursue further education. (LAL)

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HOW WELL DO "OLDER" STUDENTS READ?
OR DO OLD DOGS NEED TO LEARN NEW TRICKS?

JACQUELYN M. REINERTSON

LANGUAGE DIVISION

CHARLES STEWART MOTT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1401 EAST COURT STREET

FLINT, MICHIGAN 48503

HOW WELL DO "OLDER" STUDENTS READ?
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The professional literature is full of studies evaluating the reading skills of high school seniors and college freshmen. Every spring the country is depressed by media reports of ever decreasing national reading test scores. But how well must one read to be successful in college? Are there any salient characteristics of the "successful" student?

In the winter semester of 1979, this investigator sought answers to those questions at a large, urban, open-admissions community college - C. S. Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan (MCC). The "successful" student was defined as one who had completed most of his or her classwork and was nearing graduation. That level of success was evidenced by his or her enrollment in an upper-level class, that is, an advanced sophomore course or a class taken in the second semester of a one-year program. A total of 65 classes were identified in that category in the winter class schedule, 1979, and the students in 63 of those classes were tested. Two instructors cancelled their participation due to time/material pressures. In total, subjects numbered 828.

The students in this study took the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form A, and also completed a demographic questionnaire.

All of the information was anonymous and all testing was done by the investigator during the students' regular class periods.

The mean total reading raw score for all students in the study was 75.65 (S.D.=26.79) which has a grade equivalent of 13.1. The raw score range was 6 through 162 (percentiles 1-99). The local standard deviation was close to the national standard deviation (26.79 vs. 26.31).

The ages of the "successful" students at MCC were as varied as their reading scores. The age range was 17 to 67 years with a mean of 26.45 years; the standard deviation was 8.2 and the age mode was 20 years. Since age and total reading score were positively correlated (.2297) significantly ($P= <.0000$), the age category was further subgrouped to facilitate closer scrutiny of the relationship. Those statistics are summarized in Table 1.

(See following page)

TABLE 1

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA: AGE GROUPS, READING SCORES, SEX, FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS

Variable	Ages 17-22 yrs	Ages 23-30 yrs	Ages 30 & over	Statistic	D.F.	Signif.
Number (%)	334 (42.28)	236 (29.87)	220 (27.85)			
Females (%)	186 (55.19)	133 (55.65)	161 (71.56)	X^2: 17.64	2	.0001
Males (%)	151 (44.80)	106 (44.35)	64 (28.44)			
Mean Total Reading Score (S.D.)	67.18 (23.57)	79.94 (24.23)	85.41 (28.93)	F: 38.17	789	.0000
4 Yr. College - Likely? (%)	168 (49.85)	121 (52.16)	90 (40.54)	X^2= 12.64	6	.04
- Maybe? (%)	83 (24.63)	66 (28.45)	64 (28.83)			
- Probably Not (%)	82 (24.33)	42 (18.10)	61 (27.48)			

Students over 22 years of age had higher reading scores than those 17-22 years of age. The standard deviations were similar. Students over 30 had a higher mean reading score than both other categories and they also tended to have more varied scores. In essence, the mean reading scores and their variety increased with age in these data.

It is interesting to note that nearly 28% of the "successful" students at MCC were over 30 years old and that the great

majority of that group (71.56%) was female. Furthermore, only 40.54% of that group considered more education likely.

If one evaluates the data, one gets the general picture of a woman whose children are probably all in school now and who is training for a vocation. That woman wants to finish her studies and get a job. When one sees those students, that impression is reinforced.

But why would the mean reading scores of older students show a definite graduated trend? Perhaps older students read better because they have read longer - they have had more practice. Perhaps the older students who are motivated enough to return to school after a decade are those students who liked school and were previously good students, in other words, a more select group. Perhaps if a student is over 30, she or her spouse is paying for this training and it is important that the task be done quickly and well, for the cost is difficult to bear. Perhaps older students have had more work experience and know that schooling tends to make one a more competent and valuable employee. That knowledge may motivate them to study and strive more conscientiously. Perhaps, the national assessments are truly reflecting a trend--students are really not learning to read as well as before.

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that older students, as a group, clearly managed to score higher on this

reading test than did the younger students. The data does not support myths about older people losing their intellectual abilities. In fact, it very definitely substantiates what most community college instructors know--that older students are more serious and more dedicated about their studies. They should be encouraged to return to school at whatever age. Old dogs have already learned the tricks and they haven't forgotten!

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges
8118 Math-Sciences Building
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